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ABSTRACT

This presentation by a practicing marital therapist describes how exercise behavior can be used as a preventive measure against spouse abuse. This crisis intervention approach is intended to help couples develop stopgap techniques to prevent physical violence; it is one segment of a more comprehensive approach which might include contingency contracting between the couple, the imposition of legal sanctions, individual or group therapy for both the abuser and the victim, assertiveness training, fair fight training, communication skill training, and conflict resolution. The ensuing discussion focuses on cues which signal that marital tensions are building toward violence, and then describes strategies for intervening before fighting begins. It is argued that when levels of anger or fear reach a critical point, one needs to find a safety valve for rising blood pressure and muscular tension. It is suggested that, after calling a time out and withdrawing from the scene of conflict, spouses develop cathartic activities that reduce extreme levels of tension; these should be physically strenuous, aggressive or destructive, impersonal, safe, cheap, and private. Examples of such cathartic activities are given, including breaking bottles, kicking footballs, hitting baseballs or golfballs, chopping wood, and pounding nails. (TE)

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PRESCRIBED EXERCISE BEHAVIOR IN THE TREATMENT OF SPOUSE ABUSE

In this presentation I intend to describe how I prescribe exercise behavior as a preventive measure against spouse abuse in my work as a marital therapist. I need to acknowledge that there is a debate in the marriage and family therapy field over whether spouse abuse should even be treated in conjoint therapy sessions. I have worked both ways, sometimes treating abusers and victims individually and referring them to separate therapy groups, and sometimes treating them in conjoint sessions. What I will be talking about is a crisis intervention approach to help couples develop some stopgap techniques to prevent physical violence. This is but one segment of a more comprehensive approach which might include contingency contracting between the couple, the imposition of legal sanctions, individual or group therapy for both the abuser and the victim, assertiveness training, fair fight training, communication skill training, and conflict resolution.

In every initial evaluation session with a new client couple, I will establish whether there have been any threats of violence or actual exchanges between them. If there have been threats or actual instances of physical fighting, then working to prevent any further outbursts becomes the first order of business in the therapy even if this is not the chief or sole problem which has brought the couple to therapy.

I will shift gears now and discuss this strategy in the kind of psychoeducational way that I might with the couple in my office.

Spouses have all kinds of ways - subtle or obvious, verbal and nonverbal - of hurting each other. But nothing will inflict greater damage at a faster rate than physical fighting. Because fighting can so dramatically accelerate deterioration, compound the problems you already have, and distract you from finding any solutions, you need to stop the violence immediately.

Physical aggression usually occurs at the end of an escalating sequence of events. Some conflict is brought up. Then there may be several exchanges wherein you both are giving off and receiving cues that the tension is mounting before there is any physical eruption. Obviously, in order to completely resolve this sort of problem, you will need to be able to find some solutions to the conflicts that start such chains of events. But for now it's critical that you intervene at the most dangerous point, the physical aggression which is occurring at the end of the chain of events. Once you've done this, we can back up through the chain because we will have bought some time to work on some proble-solving about the original conflicts. So, what I am going to try to teach you now is not a comprehensive approach to solving the problem but a crisis intervention or stopgap method to defuse the anger that culminates in fighting. Once you've mastered this, we'll have the luxury of time to find some solutions to the causes for this much anger.

What I'll do in this session is talk about the cues which signal that things are getting out of hand, and then describe a strategy for intervening before fighting. Try to be on the lookout for both internal cues - the signals that let you know that you are growing

angrier or more tense or afraid - and the kinds of external cues that your spouse gives off. Internal cues might include your jaw getting tight, your fists being clenched, your neck and shoulders stiffening, your heart racing, a hot or flushed feeling coming over you. External cues that your partner generates might be things like a raised voice, a wagging finger aimed at you, certain catch phrases your spouse utters when angered, or epithets being hurled your way. Tell me some of the cues that you feel internally or that you see or hear from your partner when the tension is escalating.

When you get these cues, it's time to excuse yourself from the interaction, and you each bear a responsibility to do that. Before removing yourself from the argument, it is necessary that you say in some simple and brief way that you need a time out to cool down your emotions. You might also say that you're not abandoing your mate, nor are you merely trying to avoid discussing a problem. It is essential to explain that after the time out you will return to discuss problem solutions and try to give your mate some idea of whether you'll be back in fifteen minutes, four hours, or tomorrow. Whoever is staying while the other person takes a time out to go to a safe place must allow the other person to exit and to also permit the other person to return.

When you get this angry or this afraid, you're a little bit like a cocked pistol; the level of emotion is so high that you need some kind of eruption to discharge it. Cocked pistols don't usually get uncocked without an explosion. So once you get away from each other for the time out you need some sort of method or strategy to burn off some of the anger or fear. The kinds of activities I'll talk about are not cure-alls. That is, they don't solve the problem, and they don't even eliminate the anger. But they do reduce the tension to a

more manageable level. Once you've sought the time out, gone to a safe place, and performed some exercise to reduce the tension, then you can return, make a reconnection with each other, and talk about some solutions to the conflict.

What I'm going to do now is outline some principles to help you choose outlets for acute and extreme levels of anger or fear. The reason that these kinds of exercises work for those different kinds of emotions is that, while your mind may make a distinction between anger and fear, the subjective bodily experiences have much in common. Your blood pressure may increase, your heart rate may rise, you may perspire more, and there will probably be more muscular tension whether you are aware of it or not. Engaging in exertion which meets the criteria I am about to outline helps reduce these symptoms.

First let me just list the criteria for choosing activities to get rid of high levels of anger, fear, or anxiety. Then I'll define these criteria and describe a wide range of possible outlets that clients have found useful to ventilate. Then I'll ask you all if you can come up with any ideas of your own after hearing of several different possibilities.

Activities that reduce extreme levels of tension should be (1) physical; (2) hostile/aggressive/destructive; (3) impersonal; (4) safe; (5) cheap; and (6) private. Here is a list of these criteria and I suggest you post this somewhere in your house where you will pass by it and be reminded to look at it several times a day. The reason for this is that you want to memorize these criteria so that you can reel them off. Then, anytime you're considering some activity which might help you burn off anger, you can quickly go

through the list and determine just how helpful it will be if you remember that the activity should be physical; hostile/aggressive/ and destructive; impersonal; safe; cheap; and private. Sometimes I'll ask people what they do to try to discharge anger. If they tell me they like to listen to classical music or strum a guitar, then I can figure out quickly, by running through this list, about how effective those strategies will be. They aren't terribly physical, they are not the least bit hostile/aggressive/and destructive although they are impersonal, safe, cheap, and private. But keep in mind that the most important criteria are those first three - physical; hostile/aggressive/and destructive; and impersonal. Behaviors which do not meet those criteria are not likely to be very cathartic or helpful.

Now let me define those criteria. First the activity should be physical. The more strenuous it is, the more likely it is to burn off anger. While actual physical exertion increases muscle tension, the aftermath of the exercise leaves you with a tired, drained, or relaxed feeling. The more that the exercise causes your heart to pump harder and makes you breathe faster the better an outlet it will be.

Second, the activity should be hostile/aggressive/and destructive, and I lump those three terms together. Motor activity such as pushing, pulling, throwing, kicking, hitting, chopping, lifting, swinging, and stomping are hostile/aggressive/and destructive behaviors. If I just stop with physical and hostile/aggressive/and destructive, you might think that taking a punch at someone would meet those criteria. But remember, I said that the next criterion,

impersonal, was one of the three most critical principles. Impersonal just means that instead of aiming the anger at someone you discharge it indirectly or symbolically.

Next, the activity should be safe. You don't want to incur any risk or injury to yourself. If what you like to do is to smash bottles, then you don't want to be holding on to them when you do it or throw them at a point-blank range where the shattering glass may cut you.

The outlets should also be cheap. This may not be the best word because I'm not just talking about choosing an activity that doesn't cost much. I also mean that there should not be a high emotional or sentimental cost. You don't want to break a priceless family heirloom because it would be exorbitantly expensive to replace. But you also may not want to break the $2.00 cookie jar that you inherited from your grandmother because it has such pleasant associations and could likewise not be replaced.

Finally, choose an activity which is private. By this, I mean go somewhere where you have some solitude or else choose an activity that no one would recognize as providing an outlet for your distress. Sometimes getting angry and ventilating in front of other people merely evokes anger or defensiveness on their part. But you might choose an outlet that no one would recognize as a form of anger or fear. For instance, if you go into a batting cage to sock baseballs, people aren't going to say, "Oh, look at Fred. Doesn't he look angry?"

Let me mention some activities that clients have told me they have used in order to get some catharsis. First I'll tell a story on myself. I discovered quite by accident when I went to recycle some glass bottles many years ago that hurling the bottles into a Dempsey

Dumpster is an extremely satisfying exercise. When I went to get rid of the bottles, I wasn't feeling noticeably tense, angry, or upset in any way. But the feeling of hurling the bottles, the sound of the tinkling glass, and the pleasant emotional aftermath made me realize that such a behavior provides a great way to reduce stress. When I've told clients about this kind of activity, a number have mentioned to me that they, too, like to break things. One woman used to buy cheap sets of punch glasses which she would throw at her brick garage wall. Another man told me his whole family used to hurl "unbreakable" plates at a wall. Still another woman who thought such activities sounded terribly uncouth discovered that throwing ice cubes at a wall provided a great outlet. She had originally imagined that they would shatter like glass. But she discovered that about all they do is ricochet and skitter around the floor. She would then chase after them, jump up in the air, and stomp on them with her heels. She got a tremendous amount of relief with only about five minutes' worth of exertion.

One couple who came to me for marital therapy had discovered that they could often prevent arguments by going outside and kicking a football back and forth. Lots of people have reported such sport activities to be very appropriate. I have had any number of clients who have bought punching bags - speed bags or heavy bags - and put them up in the garage. Hitting any kind of ball provides exactly the kind of discharge of anger that I've been discussing. I don't particularly enjoy the sport of golf, but I love the feeling of thwacking golfballs at a driving range. I have had clients who went to racketball courts, tennis backboards, tetherball sets, or handball courts to burn off their frustration. When engaging in such a sport activity, it is best to choose one where your level of skill doesn't

matter. You don't want to have to be concerned about technique or any outcome other than an emotional feeling of well being or a reduction of tension.

President Reagan's favorite activity seemed to be chopping wood at his ranch. This may be one of the ideal kinds of activities because it is physical, hostile/aggressive/destructive, impersonal, safe, cheap, and private but, additionally, it is constructive and you get a nice finished product. Some men with work benches have just used pounding nails into boards as their form of anger reduction.

A number of women clients have worried that these kinds of activities seem too destructive. But one woman reported to me that she would make a double batch of bread dough and then form human figures by either using a cookie cutter or making little snowmen. She would then decapitate or otherwise dismember the figures.

One couple who used to have hellacious arguments told me that they ran three to five miles together almost every day, but even this rather strenuous level of exertion was not hostile/aggressive/destructive enough for them to reduce their anger. So they added a new element to their running. Whenever they would pass by any stop sign or road marking they would slap it with their open palm as hard as they could stand to.

Now, when working with clients, at this point I will always elicit any ideas from them that they have either used, or that they imagine that they might be able to utilize. From here I'll go to stress some additional principles. The first of these principles is that they can use such outlets before they get angry, in the midst of a conflict, or to reduce their distress after an outburst. Clearly, the most appropriate and helpful time to try to burn off anger is

preventively. So I will suggest that they think of activities that they might utilize at the beginning of a day or just prior to greeting each other at the end of the day, or preceding some particularly stressful situation they know they have to face. Another one of the principles I emphasize is that, the more activities they have, the merrier they will be. They had better not choose one activity that requires some equipment because they will not always be able to carry the equipment around with them. They had also better not choose some activity that requires a facility like a racketball court. They need outlets like clapping their hands together, jumping up and down, rolling up a newspaper and swatting at a cushion, swinging a pillow against the mattress, pounding their fists on a sofa, or running up and down flights of stairs - that they can do at almost any time or anywhere.

Before closing a session like this, I try to be sure each spouse has contributed a couple of ideas that he or she might begin practicing immediately. I also let them know that when they return for the next session I will inquire whether they have thought of any additional ideas and whether they have begun to employ some of these exercise behaviors. And I emphasize again that such exercise behavior serves as a stopgap against violence, but it does not cure them or eliminate their problems. I let the couple know that in subsequent sessions we will be discussing communication skills and problem solving.